

# RHETORICAL STRUCTURE THEORY

(Austin Hale and Ivan Lowe)

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST) is one of the theories about the logical relations between propositions (realised by clauses) and between macropropositions (realised by sentences and also by (much) larger stretches of discourse. It was originally developed a few years ago by Bill Mann and Sandra Thompson of UCLA and ISI in California, and subsequently others have had input including Christian Matthiesen, and more recently Austin Hale and Ivan Lowe of SIL.

There are a number of features of RST which make it the best theory currently on the market for dealing with logical relations. RST should help us a great deal to understand text better and thus eventually to translate better. The theory is particularly good on non narrative text. However, the theory still isn't complete in its present form, and considerable development is still necessary. For instance, it is still quite weak on narrative text.

### Distinguishing features of Rhetorical Structure Theory.

These are

1. taking discourse functions as primary
2. consideration of the author's purpose in a discourse
3. the concept of nuclearity (follows from 2)
4. the distinction between rhetorical act relations and subject matter relations.

We will deal with these distinguishing features one by one.

### Discourse features are primary

There are 'logical relationships' between stretches of text, both between big stretches of text such as paragraphs and sentence clusters, and also between small stretches of text such as clauses (and even bits of clauses at time.) RST assumes that the same logical relations hold between the bigger stretches as between the smaller stretches, and that the way to get at them is by an approach that accounts for author's purpose, nuclearity and the distinction between rhetorical act and subject matter relations.

When we look at relations between clauses we often see overt surface conjunctions, e.g. 'John couldn't sleep because he drank too much black coffee.' But sometimes the surface conjunctions aren't there (in the above example, you could easily leave out the 'because'). When we analyse big stretches of discourse we may often find that overt conjunctions are not present but the logical relationship is still there. And we have to take account of it if we are to understand the text and what it is doing.

The term 'logical relationship' is only a technical term and includes both semantic and pragmatic (i.e. situational) relationships. Let us not quibble over either the term used or over the semantics-pragmatics distinction at this point. To do so would make further progress impossible.

### Author's purpose

Consideration of the author's purpose leads to the following questions: What has the author written this text for? What is he trying to achieve by it? Some possibilities are to inform the reader, to get the reader to do some action, to get the reader to take up an attitude or to change an attitude, to sell something to the reader, etc. These questions should be asked about the text as a whole, and about each subpart of the text.

Nuclearity (the nucleus^satellite distinction)

Put concisely, a nuclear constituent is one which is more essential to the author's purpose. A satellite constituent is one which is less essential to the author's purpose. (Thus nuclearity derives from considering the author's purpose.)

Rhetorical act relations and subject matter relations

A rhetorical act relation is one which is used in a situation where the author's purpose is to achieve an interpersonal relationship with the reader, for instance to motivate the reader to ~~do~~ an action (by giving the motivation for acting), or to try to get him to believe a claim (by giving him the evidence for that claim). to get to take up an accepting attitude (by presenting justifying information), etc.

On the other hand, a subject matter relation between two constituents indicates that two parts of the text itself are related in a certain way. (ie. two propositions or two situations described by these propositions are related in a certain way.) Here the author's purpose is to show how the various parts of the text are related to each other; there is nothing interpersonal about his purpose in these cases.

General comment.

Some other theories of logical connectives may look superficially like RST in that some of the terminology is the same. Most other theories, however, assume that there are certain relationships between clauses (or propositions) and then assume that relationships between larger stretches of discourse are the same. So in fact the basic assumptions of the other theories are different from those of RST. And they will not come out with the same final results. (they also seem to leave some things unexplained, but at the moment RST doesn't explain everything either.)

## NUCLEARITY

Nuclearity is determined by the following considerations:

1. The nucleus is more essential to the author's purpose than the satellite. This is seen in the following:
  - i Take a text, delete all the satellites and you still have the essential message of the text left in what remains, i.e. the nuclei. The text is still going the same place. the message still resembles that of the original, though it sounds a bit bumpy. But delete all the nuclei and the content that you have left is incoherent--there is no message left and no purpose.
  - ii The writer indicates by nuclearity that the nucleus is more deserving of response, (including deliberation, attention and reaction) than the satellite.
  - iii Often the satellite cannot be understood without the nucleus, but not vice versa. The satellite gains its significance through the nucleus.
  - iv Often the satellite can be substituted without affecting the function of the nucleus in the discourse context. The nucleus however cannot be substituted without affecting the discourse function

quite radically however. Thus for example in a claim^supportpair, the support(satellite) can be changed without affecting the discourse function of the claim. But you can't change the claim content.

Here is an example illustrating point i, the effect on a text of deleting all the satellites, and of deleting all the nuclei.

#### SYNCOM ADVERTISEMENT

- 1.What if you're having to clean floppy drive heads too often?
- 2.Ask for SYNCOM diskettes, with burnished Ectype coating and dust-absorbing jacket liners.
- 3.As your floppy drive writes or reads,
- 4.a Syncom diskette is working four ways
- 5.to keep loose particles and dust from causing soft errors, dropouts.
- 6.Cleaning agents on the burnished surface of the Ectype coating actually remove build-up from the head
- 7.while lubricating it at the same time.
- 8.A carbon additive drains away static clelectricity
- 9.before it can attract dust or lint.
- 10Strong binders hold the signal-carrying oxides tightly within the coating.
- 11a.And the non-woven jacket liner, 11b more than just wiping the surface, 11c provides thousands of tiny pockets to keep what it collects.
- 12.To see which Syncom diskette will replace the ones you're using now,
- 13.send for our free "Flex-Finder" selection guide and the name of the supplier nearest you.
- 14.Syncom, Box 130, Mitchell, SD 57301, 800-843-9862; 605-996-8200.

Now look at the following set of sentences (all the nuclear sentences in the above.)

- 2.Ask for SYNCOM diskettes, with burnished Ectype coating and dust-absorbing jacket liners.
- 4.a Syncom diskette is working four ways
- 6.Cleaning agents on the burnished surface of the Ectype coating actually remove build-up from the head
- 8.A carbon additive drains away static clelectricity
- 10Strong binders hold the signal-carrying oxides tightly within the coating.
- 11a.And the non-woven jacket liner
- 11c provides thousands of tiny pockets to keep what it collects
- 13.send for our free "Flex-Finder" selection guide and the name of the supplier nearest you.

These seven sentences together make up a coherent meaningful text, even though at times it may feel a bit jerky and non smooth.

Now look at the following set of sentences (all satellites, but again from the above text.)

- 1.What if you're having to clean floppy drive heads too often?
- 3.As your floppy drive writes or reads,
- 5.to keep loose particles and dust from causing soft errors, dropouts.
- 7.while lubricating it at the same time.

- 9. before it can attract dust or lint.
- 11b more than just wiping the surface
- 12. To see which Syncom diskette will replace the ones you're using now,

Note that this last set of sentences do not form a coherent text together. Taken together they make no sense. So the satellites together don't make up a coherent text, but the nuclears together do.

However, notice that this matter of deletability of the satellite has been approached and conclusions arrived at after just one case study of one particular text. It does not guarantee deletability of all satellites under the same criteria. Each nucleus^satellite pair needs to be examined on its own merits. In fact some nucleus^satellite pairs seem to have nondeletable satellites in certain contexts.

## KINDS OF RHETORICAL RELATIONS

Rhetorical act (or presentational) relations, and subject matter relations  
There are rhetorical act relations and subject matter relations,

### 1) Rhetorical act relations.

Rhetorical act relations have to do with either the success or felicity of the rhetorical speech act expressed in the nuclear proposition. Usually his means either

- (i) getting the hearer to do something, or
- (ii) influencing the hearer's attitude or mental set

Rhetorical act relations are interpersonal in nature; they have to do with the relationship between the author and reader (or speaker and hearer.)

### 2) Subject matter relations

Subject matter relations are relationships between the situations that the text reports and that do not have to do with the interpersonal relation between author and reader. They thus report relations between events, or between situations and other situations.

Subject matter relations are further subclassed into elaborating, enhancing and extending relations

#### A list of rhetorical act relations

solutionhood  
motivation  
enablement

justify  
evidence

evaluation  
antithesis

background

#### A list of subject matter relations

elaborating

elaboration  
restatement  
summary  
interpretation

enhancing

circumstance  
  
volitional cause  
volitional result  
non volitional cause  
non volitional result  
reason  
means  
purpose

concession

condition  
otherwise

extending

list  
alternative

comparison-equal  
comparison-unequal  
contrast

sequence



## A QUICK RUN THROUGH ALL THE RHETORICAL RELATIONS WITH EXAMPLES

The purpose of this subsection is simply a quick overview of the whole field of the rhetorical relations. The aim here is not to do anything in depth, but rather to get a feel for what the whole system is like. In depth study will come later.

In this quick run through, all the examples will show the RST relationships as holding between clauses. This is purely for convenience of illustration. Later in the more comprehensive illustrations, the same relationships will be shown between non clausal units as well.

### Rhetorical Act relations.

The purpose of a rhetorical act relation is either to get the hearer to do something, or to influence the hearer's attitude or mental set.

The rhetorical act relations will be illustrated in the same order as they were set out in the previous handout.

Subset 1      solutionhood  
                 motivation  
                 enablement

All these relations have the purpose of getting the hearer to do a potential action.

**Solutionhood.** The satellite presents a potential action which if done will solve a problem. The purpose of presenting the satellite is to influence the hearer to do that action.

Example:

I'm hungry	LET'S GO TO THE PEKING CREEP.
problem	solution(potential action)

**Motivation.** The satellite presents information which shows the advantages to the hearer of carrying out the proposed potential action. The purpose of presenting the satellite is to influence the hearer to do that action.

Example:

Take Bufferin.	THE BUFFERING COMPONENT PREVENTS
EXCESS STOMACH ACID	
potential action	motivation

**Enablement.** The satellite presents information which the hearer would need to know in order to take the necessary steps to carry out the potential action. The purpose of presenting the satellite is to enable the hearer to carry out the potential action, once he had decided he wanted to do it.

Example:

The LA Chamber Orchestra is giving four concerts next week.  
implies potential action

FOR TICKETS AND FURTHER INFORMATION RING 751-4030  
enablement

Subset 2      justify  
                 evidence

These two relations have to do with influencing the hearer's attitude in some way.

Justify. The purpose of the satellite is to present information which will influence the hearer's attitude towards the author, and give him the right (or authority) to make the assertion that he is about to make (or has just made).

Example:

I'M OFFICER KRUPKE.

And you're under arrest.

I'M RICHARD BEWES THE VICAR HERE.

Welcome to All Souls

justify

assertion

support. The purpose of the satellite information is to present support which will strengthen the hearer's belief in the assertion of the nuclear proposition.

Example:

It rained last night. THE PAVEMENT IS WET.

assertion

evidence

### Subset 3

evaluation

antithesis

The general purpose of the relations in subset 3 is to influence the hearer's positive or negative regard towards a proposition or situation.

Evaluation. The purpose of the evaluation satellite is to present the speaker's positive or negative regard for a situation with the object of influencing the hearer's positive or negative regard.

Example:

Sue had gained a first in business administration at university and was making an excellent salary.  
situation

THAT DIDN'T SOUND LIKE FAILURE

evaluation

Antithesis. The purpose of an antithesis satellite is to present information which will show the speaker's negative regard towards one situation and his positive regard towards another situation with view to influencing the hearer's attitude the same way.

Example:

This book claims to be a guide to the trees of Indiana.  
thesis (~~nuclear~~ *satellite*)

IT DOESN'T EVEN HAVE OAK TREES IN IT.

antithesis (~~satellite~~)

*nuclear*

Example:

Players want a referee to balance a bad call benefiting one team with a bad call benefiting the other.

thesis (*satellite*)

AS A REFEREE, I JUST WANT TO CALL EACH PLAY AS I SEE IT.

antithesis (~~satellite~~)  
nuclear

*Explanatory - Clarification (Grimes)*

Background. The purpose of the information in the background satellite is to provide explanation which will increase the hearer's understanding of a situation. This, in the context of a proposed potential action, will enable him to carry out the proposed action. Where there is no potential action suggested in the context, it will increase his understanding and perhaps give him the right attitude toward the information of the nucleus.

Example:

Someone left a coffee cup in my office over the weekend.

background (satellite)

WILL THE OWNER PLEASE COME AND GET IT *as little green things are growing inside it*  
potential action (nuclear)

The background information will alert the owner as to where his coffee cup is so that he can come and collect it.

Example:

Hayes has just resigned. HE'S OUR CHANCELLOR

situation(nuclear) background(satellite)

The background information should alert the hearer as to the seriousness of the situation which he may not be aware of if he hadn't known what role Hayes had (compare \*He's the janitor)

### Subject matter relations

Subject matter relations are relationships between the situations that the text reports and that do not have to do with the interpersonal relation between author and reader. They thus report relations between events, or between situations and other situations.

The illustrations here will be presented in the same order as the relations themselves were enumerated in the previous handout.

### Elaborating relationships.

elaboration  
restatement  
summary  
interpretation

The general purpose of elaborating relationships is to make statements about the content of the nuclear proposition.

Elaboration. The satellite (i.e. the elaboration) in the elaboration relation provides additional information about the situation of the nuclear proposition, or about some element of the nuclear proposition, or about

something inferentially accessible in the nuclear proposition. The most common specific relations in elaboration are

set:member  
 abstract:instance  
 generalization:specific instance  
 whole:part  
 process:step  
 object:attribute

The purpose of the elaboration relation is to give the hearer more understanding of the nuclear situation by providing more information about it. (i.e. explanation by added detail.) *like background.*

Example:

We had a problem on the motorway.  
 situation (nucleus)

THE ENGINE COUGHED AND SPLUTTERED AND JUST GAVE UP. NOTHING WE COULD DO WOULD INDUCE IT TO START UP AGAIN.  
 elaboration (satellite)

Restatement. In the restatement relation the satellite (the restatement) restates the content of the nuclear proposition in a proposition of comparable bulk. The author's purpose in the restatement is either to give extra prominence to the nuclear proposition, or to present the essential content of the nuclear proposition again from a different viewpoint, or both.

Example:

A well groomed car reflects its owner.  
 nuclear proposition

THE CAR YOU DRIVE SAYS A LOT ABOUT YOU.  
 restatement (satellite)

Summary. In the summary relation the satellite (the summary) restates the content of the nuclear proposition in shorter bulk than the nuclear proposition itself. The purpose of the summary is so that the reader can capture the essential content of the total nuclear proposition at a glance.  
*Topic Sentence, details.*

Example: Look at the abstract at the beginning of any linguistic article and compare the abstract with the main body of the article itself.

Interpretation. In the interpretation relation, the satellite (the interpretation) relates the one specific case which is treated in the nuclear proposition to a more general or more inclusive category. It is an assessment in terms of related categories. (but not in terms of good or bad) The purpose is to relate the situation of the nuclear proposition to a framework of items outside the nuclear proposition itself.

Example:

Steep declines in capital spending commitments and building permits along with a drop in money stock pushed the leading composite down for the fifth time in the past 11 months to a level 0.5% below its high in May 1984.  
 situation (nucleus)



satellite is to present a situation that could have caused the nuclear situation. (A better name might be cause of a non-volitional situation)

Example:

We've been able to mine our own iron ore, coal, manganese, dolomite, all of the materials we need to make our own steel.

And because we can mine more than we need,  
non volitional cause (satellite)

we have plenty of manganese and iron ore for export.  
non volitional situation (nucleus).

Note particularly that 'we have plenty of manganese and iron ore for export.' is a non volitional situation.

Volitional result. Here the nucleus must be a volitional action. The purpose of the volitional result satellite is to present a situation (volitional or otherwise) that is the result of the volitional action presented in the nucleus. (A better name would be result of a volitional action)

Example:

FARMINGTON POLICE HAD TO HELP CONTROL THE TRAFFIC RECENTLY  
volitional result (satellite)

when hundreds of people lined up to be the among the first to apply for a job at the yet-to-open Marriott Hotel  
volitional action (nucleus)

(Note in this example that the surface subordinate clause look of the second constituent does not stop it being the nucleus)

Non-volitional result. Here the nucleus must be a non-volitional situation. The purpose of the non-volitional result satellite is to present a situation that is the result of the situation presented in the nucleus. (A better name for the relation might be result of a non-volitional situation.)

Example:

The blast, the worst industrial accident in Mexico's history, destroyed the plant and most of the surrounding suburbs.  
non volitional situation (nucleus)

SEVERAL THOUSAND PEOPLE WERE INJURED AND ABOUT 300 ARE STILL IN HOSPITAL.  
result (satellite)

Reason. The purpose of the reason satellite is to present information which the speaker believes to be the reason for the situation of the situation of the nucleus.

Example:

I'm not going to learn Swahili. You can't teach an old dog new situation  
(nucleus) reason (satellite) tricks.

(not cause)

... excuse

cause - happening, circumstances,  
reason - something thought about

Some of the things that are at present subsumed under volitional cause I would want to call reason. There will be a discussion of this later.

Means. The purpose of the means satellite is to present the means, method, instrument or other secondary (agency) through which the situation of the nucleus was realised.

Example:

BY LOOKING AT THE CLASSIFIED ADS, he was able to get a nice car. *agent, change of state of patient*  
*proto-type physical*  
*John hit Bill with a stone.*  
 means(satellite) realised situation (nucleus)

*Sakoff - we live by.*  
Purpose. The purpose of the purpose satellite is give the purpose i.e. the situation which is to be realised through the activity described in the nucleus. (Note that (i) the purpose is not necessarily realised, and (ii) the activity of the nucleus is not always volitional).

Example: (with volitional activity)

TO SEE WHICH SYNCOM DISKETTES WILL REPLACE THE ONES YOU'RE USING NOW  
 purpose (satellite)

send for our free Flexi-Finder selection guide.  
 activity (nucleus)

Example: with non volitional activity

There is competition among trees in certain forest environments to become as tall as possible  
 activity (nucleus-volitional?)

SO AS TO CATCH AS MUCH OF THE SUN AS POSSIBLE FOR PHOTOSYNTHESIS  
 purpose (satellite)

Concession. In a construction with a concession satellite, there is an apparent incompatibility between the situations of the satellite and the nucleus. The total construction asserts that there is no real incompatibility. In other words that the situation of the nucleus holds in spite of the situation of the satellite.

Example:

ALTHOUGH THIS SPRAY KILLS MOSQUITOS,  
 concession (satellite)

evidence is lacking that it has any serious effects on humans. .  
 situation (nucleus)

Condition. The purpose of a condition satellite is to present an other world situation under which the speech act in the nucleus is true, or felicitous or relevant.

Examples:

IF YOU THINK DIFFERENTLY, you will feel and act differently.

condition (satellite)                      speech act (nucleus)(will be true)

IF IT STARTS TO RAIN, bring in the washing off the line.

condition (satellite)      speech act (nucleus)(will be felicitous)

There is food in the fridge

speech act (nucleus)(will be relevant)

IF YOU ARE HUNGRY,

condition (satellite)

Otherwise. This is very much condition, except that otherwise means if a condition does not hold.

Example:

It's new brochure time and that means a chance for new project writeups.

Anyone desiring to update their entry in this brochure should have their copy in by December 1.

OTHERWISE, the existing entry will be used..

otherwise      nucleus

(satellite)

Extending relationships. Extending relationships are multinuclear, in other words, it cannot be said that one constituent is satellite to another; rather, all constituents are equally nuclear.

The general purpose of extending relationships is to add something entirely new to the information in a nucleus (rather than qualify or expand on the information in a nucleus as the enhancing relationships did.)

The following are the extending relationships

extending

list

alternative

comparison-equal

comparison-unequal

contrast

sequence

They will be illustrated one by one in turn.

List, This one is very difficult to define but everyone knows one when you see one!

Example:

When you go to Wycombe, BUY SOME ORANGES AND BANANAS,  
circumstance    nucleus

TAKE THE TV IN TO BE SERVICED, AND PAY THE MORTGAGE.

nucleus

nucleus

There is clearly no time sequence or any sort of sequence between the nuclei. On the other hand it is not correct to simply say that there is no



relation at all between the nuclei because there are obviously many things which could not go into the above list. (and this applies to every list)

Alternatives. The various nuclei refer to alternatives possible in the context.

EITHER PAY EACH MONTH BY CHEQUE, OR USE A BANK DIRECT DEBIT  
nucleus

nucleus

### Comparison equal

In comparison equal two or more entities are compared focussing on their likeness to each other. (

**Example:**

BIRDS DO NOT HAVE PROPELLERS any more than HUMANS HAVE WINGS  
parallel nucleus

parallel nucleus

CAMBRIDGE WITHOUT BICYCLES is like THE DESERT WITHOUT CAMELS - This may be more elaboration as rain there  
 Eskimo w.o sleds, CAL. w.o. surfboards ← is a protest about banning bikes in C.  
 Coast

## Contrast

In contrast two or more nuclei are compared focussing on their differences from each other.

Example:

OMEGAS ARE EXPENSIVE AND GREAT FOR SHOWING OFF AT COCKTAIL PARTIES  
nucleus

contrasting

SEIKOS ARE REASONABLY PRICED AND RELIABLE,  
contrasting nucleus

while TIMEXES WILL GIVE OUT ON YOU IN SIX MONTHS OR LESS.  
contrasting nucleus.

(This could be an answer to question like "What sort of watch should I buy? Note that each brand of watch is set out as being different from the others.)

Sequence. There is some sort of succession relationship between a number of nuclei. Usually the succession relation is simple time sequence, i.e. one action following another. But other kinds of succession are possible too.

Example of time sequence.

Peel some oranges. Slice crosswise. Arrange in a bowl.

nucleus	nucleus	nucleus
---------	---------	---------

Sprinkle with rum and coconut. Chill till ready to serve.  
nucleus nucleus.

### Potential author questions

A helpful way towards understanding some of the RST relations is to think of possible questions that an author might ask himself at various points as he is engaged in composing and writing a text. Here are some such

questions. Within the brackets that follow, are given the relevant RST relationship, and the reason why.

1. If I say X, will the reader believe it. (support increases reader belief in a proposition)
2. What do I know that is support for X (evidence)
3. Does the reader have the prerequisite knowledge to understand a straight forward statement of X or does he need more help? (background increases reader ability to understand a text. It can also facilitate his performing a potential act by showing him more about the situation of the act and how he is relevant to it.)
4. If X is suggested as an action for the reader to perform, will he want to do it? (motivation increases reader desire to perform a potential act.)
5. If the reader wants to do X, will he be able to do it? (enablement increases the reader ability to perform an act.)
6. Do I have the right to present X at this point.? (justify increases the acceptance of a speech act.)
7. Does the reader know of a particular refutation of X which I believe to be not a genuine refutation? (concession asserts a proposition in the face of an apparently refuting proposition.)

## RELATION AND CONSTITUENCY DESCRIPTIONS.

There are two alternative ways of describing rhetorical relations. One is the relation description, and this simply describes the relation by giving the name of the relation, e.g., solutionhood, evidence, etc. The other is the constituency description, and this describes the relation by naming the constituents that bear that rhetorical relation to each other, e.g., problem^solution, and claim^support would be the constituency descriptions for the solutionhood and support relations named above.

It is useful to have the two different descriptions because there is not necessarily a one to one correspondence between them. That is to say, more than one pair of constituents can bear the same relationship to each other. Moreover, to think in terms of constituents sometimes forces us to look more carefully at the content of that constituent.

We will now give the alternative descriptions of all the RST relations. First, the rhetorical act relations.

### RHETORICAL ACT RELATIONS

relation description	constituency description
solutionhood	problem^solution
motivation	potential action^motivation
enablement	potential action^enablement
justify	speech act^justification
evidence	claim^evidence
evaluation	situation^evaluation
antithesis	thesis^antithesis
background	potential action^background, (rhetorical act case)
or background	situation^background (subject matter case)

Next the subject matter relations

### SUBJECT MATTER RELATIONS

#### elaborating relations

relation description	constituency description
elaboration	statement^elaboration
restatement	statement^restatement
summary	text^summary
interpretation	situation^interpretation

#### enhancing relations

relation description	constituency description
----------------------	--------------------------

circumstance

volitional cause  
volitional result  
non volitional cause  
non volitional result  
reason

means  
purpose  
concession

condition  
otherwise

extending relations  
list  
alternative

comparison-equal  
comparison-unequal  
contrast

sequence

circumstance^situation

cause^volitional action

cause^nonvolitional situation

situation^reason, or  
proposition^reason

means^realised situation  
purpose^activity ([+/-volition])  
concession^assertion

condition^situation  
otherwise^situation

In the extending relations, all the constituents are coordinate, so that it isn't very important to name them.